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ABSTRACT

This document consists of Part 4 of a book of readings on at-risk youth designed to provide information and strategies for counselors, teachers, parents, administrators, social workers, and others who work with youth at risk. Part 4 deals with the school dropout and school and community programs that have proven to be effective in working with at-risk populations. "Understanding and Preventing School Dropout" (James Kushman & Paula Kinney) discusses the complexity of the dropout problem and presents information that addresses the dropout issue from the perspective of the student, the family, the school, and the community. Intervention strategies are discussed that focus on both the individual and the larger system in which the individual functions. "The Solution Lies in Programs That Work" (Walter Hathaway, Carolyn Sheldon, & Patrick McNamara) contains information related to regional and national programs directed at helping at-risk youth. Programs were selected for inclusion in this chapter based on the positive effects they have demonstrated with the at-risk population. (NB)

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Part IV

COMBATING THE ULTIMATE RISK: SCHOOL DROPOUT

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Chapter 14

UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING SCHOOL DROPOUT

James W. Kushman and Paula Kinney

School dropout is a highly visible sign of a society that has failed to prepare its youth for successful transition into adulthood. It is an issue that should be of great concern to school and community counselors working with young people and their families. School dropout is a problem that has recently gained much public attention. Ironically, the heightened concern about students not completing school comes at a time when long-term demographic trends show a decline in the high school dropout rate. Census data indicate that among 25 to 29 year olds, 16% of the U.S. population in 1980 did not complete high school compared to a noncompletion rate of 60% in 1940. Although this may give us some comfort, state-level statistics show a rather different short-term trend with high school noncompletion rates creeping upward beginning in the early 1970s (Rumberger, 1987).[1]

It is clear that the problem does not affect all groups equally. Poor and minority students tend to experience the highest dropout rates, and boys show higher rates than girls. Figures from the U.S. Department of Education's High School and Beyond national sample of 1980 high school sophomores indicate that 19% of Hispanics and 17% of Blacks drop out of school by their senior year compared to 13% of Whites. Dropout rates by socioeconomic status (defined by family income and parents' occu-

[1]Estimates of the dropout rate can vary to a surprising degree depending on how "dropout" is defined and measured. Sources of dropout statistics include special U.S. census surveys, large national samples of youth who are tracked over time, and data compiled by state departments of education and local school districts. As yet, there is no agreed-upon method for estimating the problem. The reader is cautioned against comparing dropout rates from different sources.

pation and educational background) show the top half of the social stratum with a dropout rate of 18% compared to a rate of 35% for low and low-middle socioeconomic students (High School and Beyond figures as reported by U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), 1986). Given these disparities, it is not at all surprising that the dropout problem is most concentrated in large urban areas where poor and minority students tend to live. It is not uncommon to hear of dropout rates in some urban schools in cities like New York or Detroit climbing as high as 80%.

There are both moral and economic implications of students dropping out of school. First, a society based on humanistic and democratic ideals cannot simply sacrifice or write off large numbers of youth who, because of their failure in school, gravely limit their potential and future well-being. Second, there are serious economic consequences of an undereducated population. Large numbers of dropouts weaken the economy because they are unprepared to work and because they place a burden on unemployment and welfare services, not to mention the criminal justice system. Dropouts run the risk of becoming drains on society rather than productive and contributing members. Census and labor market surveys indicate that today's high school dropouts are two to three times more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates and are also more likely to find themselves in low-level jobs (GAO, 1986). The problem becomes exacerbated as we move further into the so-called postindustrial economy where important jobs will require more education and more problem-solving skills. Coupled with the changing nature of work is the fact that ethnic groups such as Hispanics with high dropout rates will continue to compose a greater share of the work force.

That young people do not complete school is both a moral and an economic tragedy. In a general sense, counselors can play an important role by helping at-risk youth realize the tragedies that may lie ahead. Counselors must help at-risk youth see the connections between present choices to stay in or drop out of school and future personal consequences such as wasted lives, unemployment, and involvement in crime. This does not require moralizing, but providing young people with a realistic picture of the consequences of not completing their education. Interestingly, youth who drop out of school tend to experience increased self-esteem at first, but over time, these feelings tend to be replaced by great remorse as negative personal consequences are fully realized.

Although the label "dropout" is conveniently applied to large numbers of students who do not finish school, such a label belies the fact that they are a diverse group who leave school under diverse circumstances. The implication is that there is no single cure-all that can be uniformly applied by counselors or educators. Helping potential dropouts requires a clear understanding that the problem is complex and multi-

faceted. Bickel, Bond, and LeMahieu (1988) pointed out that the term "dropout" itself is potentially misleading because it implies a single decision point to leave school, with the student as the sole decision maker. Such is not always the case. Some students merely "fade out" after a period of feeling alienated from school. Others can be subtly or not so subtly "pushed out" by school personnel who do not want to deal with them any longer. Still others are "pulled out" either by more important demands on their time such as parenting or supporting elderly family members, or by negative community influences such as gangs. It is also important to remember that some students leave school but do return, perhaps only to drop out again. As yet, a precise typology of early school leavers has not been developed. It is clear, however, that different students leave school under different circumstances and for varied reasons, even students within the same school.

In this chapter, we will unravel some of the complexity of the dropout problem in the hopes of making it a manageable issue with which counselors can deal. We will talk about four points of intervention throughout the chapter. Two are areas that counselors are perhaps more familiar with: the student and the family. Two other important areas, however, cannot be overlooked: the school and the community. Two broad strategies of intervention will be discussed, one that focuses on the individual and one that focuses on the larger system in which the individual functions.

The rest of this chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section will discuss the characteristics of school leavers, the visible warning signs, and the presumed underlying causes based on recent research. In the second section, a less abstract discussion of two practical intervention strategies will be presented. These two broad strategies will be called the *clinical approach* and the *systemic approach*. Throughout both of these sections, implications for school and community counselors will be drawn. In the final section, we will summarize and conclude with the larger implications for practice and policy, focusing on the special role of school and community counselors.

Warning Signs and Underlying Causes

A great deal of research over the years has attempted to identify factors related to school dropout. Rumberger (1987), in his recent review, classified the many variables into six categories: demographic, family-related, peer influence, school-related, economic, and individual. Perhaps a more useful distinction for designing counseling interventions is to think of variables as falling into two broad categories: *demographic*

correlates, which represent the students' more stable background, and *early warning signs*, which represent more immediate and alterable student characteristics.

Demographic Correlates

It has been well documented by now that some racial minorities—Native Americans, Hispanics, and Blacks—are more likely to drop out than Whites and that men are more likely to drop out than women. What factors underlie racial differences? One plausible explanation found to hold merit is social/economic disadvantage, a condition more prevalent among minorities than Whites. Rumberger (1983), using data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, found that when background and home characteristics such as parents' education and aspirations, income level, number of reading materials in the home, and so forth were held constant, the racial gap in dropout rates virtually disappeared. Another factor is language. Among some groups like Mexican-Americans or Asian-Americans, language differences undoubtedly play a part in school success or failure and, therefore, are another factor to consider in explaining differential dropout rates. Finally, a "cultural differences" argument also has been made to explain why some groups fail in school. This view has been most clearly articulated for Black students. Ogbu (1981, 1986) and Boynkin (1986) hypothesized a deep-seated cultural conflict between the Black experience in the American urban ghetto and in American public schools. The cultural conflict centers around two issues: (1) the devaluation of mainstream education by Black culture and families given the few perceived economic benefits of completing a formal education, and (2) differences between the culturally rooted thinking and behavior styles of Afro-American children and schools that cater to a Euro-American style of behavior and learning. This second point is rather controversial, that is whether unique ethnic styles of learning and cognition actually exist. Shade (1982) reviewed the literature on Afro-American cognitive styles, and although some studies have found specific differences between Blacks and Whites, the evidence is sparse and far from conclusive.

In summary social, ethnic, and cultural background are the major demographic correlates of school dropout. Students who have traditionally not been part of the American mainstream, such as the poor and some ethnic groups, may experience greater difficulties in school. Schools are not always responsive to the needs of different ethnic and cultural groups. Although we do not yet fully understand why some groups drop out more than others, it seems clear that such differences are best understood in terms of underlying factors such as family circumstances.

language skills, and cultural differences to which schools have been slow to respond. We live in an increasingly pluralistic society. Counselors working with at-risk youth need to be sensitive to the diversity of backgrounds and cultures from which today's students come.

Early Warning Signs

The factors described above represent relatively stable and unchangeable background characteristics of the individual. Another set of variables are characteristics and circumstances that are more immediate and alterable through educational and counseling strategies. Studies have identified a variety of school and personal factors predictive of dropping out, factors that counselors can view as early warning signs. These variables fall into four categories: poor academic performance, behavior problems, affective characteristics, and personal circumstances.

Poor academic performance is usually evidenced by low grades, low test scores, and being held back one or more grades before high school. School counselors do need to communicate with teachers so that patterns of low performance or academic failure can be identified early. Academic performance is intertwined with behavior and affective problems, with which counselors deal directly. Behavior problems are usually evidenced by disruptive classroom behavior, cutting classes, truancy, and suspension. The affective areas that counselors will most likely have to treat are poor or unrealistic self-concepts and feelings of alienation, that is, feelings of not fitting into the school or classroom. Finally, many student circumstances such as teen pregnancy, teen parenting, having to work, and caring for sick or elderly family members can conflict with school demands. This is an area where counselors can play a critical role in helping students find ways to balance school and outside demands, and in advocating for students who have unique circumstances that require special school or community services such as a teen mother program.

Obviously, some of these factors can occur early in a child's school career, and the question of when to identify potential dropouts is a crucial one. As in other counseling areas, early identification is a delicate matter not to be taken lightly. Although it is desirable from a prevention standpoint to identify potential dropouts as early as possible, caution must be exercised. It is imperative to avoid harsh labels that lead to stereotyping by teachers and other students, and negative self-concepts and lowered aspirations among those so labeled.

How early *can* potential dropouts be identified? Certainly earlier than high school and even as early as the primary grades. A study by

Lloyd (1978) of a group of 1,500 students was able to successfully discriminate school dropouts from high school graduates based on sixth-grade and third-grade student characteristics. For the third-grade analysis, a combination of four factors was found to discriminate dropouts from graduates with 75% accuracy: (1) achievement scores (especially in reading); (2) global ability (IQ test); (3) socioeconomic status and family background characteristics; and (4) retention (nonpromotion) during the first three grades. The same characteristics were found to hold for the sixth-grade analysis, with the addition of school attendance. Although such variables are predictive of dropping out, it is important to keep in mind that they are not foolproof indicators. In Lloyd's discriminant analysis, for example, 25% of the students were misclassified based on third-grade characteristics, pointing out that some students do succeed despite early warning signs to the contrary. And of course success is much more likely when prevention and early intervention measures are taken by counselors and other school staff.

Although identifying individual student risk factors is important to planning and implementing counseling interventions, we do not wish to advocate a "blaming the victim" mentality that such an exercise often becomes; that is, focusing all of the blame on students and their behaviors. One point of view, developed later in this chapter, holds that schools and other institutions should take their share of the responsibility for the dropout problem. Relevant to this argument is an educational issue currently being debated. Educators are beginning to wonder whether new school reforms aimed at raising academic standards are at least partially responsible for increases in school dropout. McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1987) identified three possible ways in which this might happen. First, a high school curriculum that is narrowly focused on basic skills instruction not only limits student choice but also defines student success in narrow terms. These conditions have the potential to push low performing students out, especially those who enter high school with a long history of academic problems.

A second school reform that might have an adverse effect is increased learning time outside of the school (e.g., assigning more homework, an extended school day). Although time is not a scarce resource for most teenagers, some have legitimate adult demands on their free time such as working to supplement family income, helping with sick relatives, or raising children. Without some concessions for these students, increased academic time demands can become another reason for leaving school. A further complication is that after-school academic time usually takes away from extracurricular activities, activities that may be the only positive attachment to school for students who experience problems in the classroom. With regard to homework, students who live

in overcrowded households or have undereducated parents may lack adequate support outside of school to meet increased homework demands. Finally, tougher graduation standards and minimum competency testing (the practice of not graduating students until they demonstrate minimum basic skills in reading, math, and language) also can have obvious adverse effects on students with academic difficulties. If standards are raised, additional assistance is needed for students who cannot easily meet the tougher graduation criteria. Speculation continues about how recent school reforms might adversely affect at-risk students, but there has been no research to directly confirm or deny these suspicions. Nevertheless, it is certainly reasonable to assume that rigid school reforms that fail to take into account the needs of at-risk youth may do more harm than good.

Research Findings of a More Explanatory Nature

Up to now we have described the important correlates of dropping out, but this is far from a deep understanding of the complex and underlying causes of dropout behavior. Three recent studies that have more of an explanatory focus will be presented in some detail. Special attention will be paid to presumed causal factors that are most relevant to planning counseling strategies.

Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock (1986) looked at differences between school stayers and leavers and tried to answer the question of why one student drops out and not another. The study analyzed data from the High School and Beyond national sample of 30,000 high school sophomores and seniors. Behavior and attitude measures were taken of sophomores in 1980 and 2 years later for both graduates and nongraduates. Consistent with research on smaller student samples, it was found that behavior problems and low grades were the major differences between those who graduated and those who did not.

The behavior pattern of the sophomores who eventually dropped out showed less affiliation and more disengagement from school than among those who graduated. Specific behaviors of the dropout group included doing less homework (an average of 2¼ hours per week for dropouts vs. 3½ hours for graduates), participating less in extracurricular activities such as athletics, and more frequently working for pay during their sophomore year, although here the difference between dropouts and graduates was small. An important attitudinal difference regarding work, however, was that dropouts were more likely than graduates to view their current jobs as being more important than school (23% vs. 10%). Other attitudes of dropouts matched their disengaged behaviors. Dropouts expressed more alienation from school life and were less in-

terested and less satisfied with school, their teachers, and their education generally. Dropouts also felt less popular than graduates. An interesting finding was that dropouts tended to have friends who expressed the same feelings of alienation. This suggests the importance of peers in influencing the attitudes and behaviors of at-risk students.

The study by Ekstrom et al. (1986) also tested a causal model using a statistical procedure called path analysis. This model provided evidence that parents and home life play a large role in dropout behavior. The model found that whereas disciplinary problems and low academic performance had the most immediate effect on decisions to stay in or drop out, a lack of family involvement was seemingly an important cause of the school misbehavior and academic problems. Lack of family involvement was evidenced by few educational supports in the home (e.g., reading materials) and parents who were uninvolved in helping students make curriculum choices. It was also found that dropouts were less likely than graduates to discuss their school experiences with parents.

Wehlage and Rutter (1986) also analyzed the High School and Beyond sophomore data. Using a technique called discriminant analysis, selected variables were used to predict membership in three groups: those who had dropped out by their senior year, those who stayed in, and those who were college-bound. Although the first discriminant function reflected traditional findings such as low socioeconomic status, low student expectations, and low academic performance as predictors of dropping out, a second set of variables was also found to be important independently of this first function. The second set of variables showed negative school experiences (most notably, discipline problems) and lifestyle factors like truancy and increased hours spent working outside of school as circumstances that discriminate dropouts from graduates and college-bound students. The authors interpreted these and other findings as suggestive of a dropout process where, for some students, the school experience is very negative and leads to disengagement, alienation, and loss of commitment to the goals of graduating and continuing with education. For these students, schools lack holding power. What is it about school and the school experience that pushes some students out? The next study addressed this very question.

Fine (1986) conducted an in-depth case study of a comprehensive high school in upper Manhattan composed of low-income students who were primarily Black and Hispanic. Although the school was in a poor area of the city, it was characterized as having a good reputation for safety and stability. Fine conducted observations in classrooms and other school settings, looked at student autobiographies, conducted in-home interviews with 30 recent dropouts and 15 who had dropped out 4 years earlier, and administered surveys to 350 ninth graders, some of whom

were followed up later. Her results demonstrated how different students in the same school and urban setting expressed different reasons for dropping out. Some were very critical of schooling and its worth in obtaining a job or a good income. Others had to attend to family health or economic needs that interfered with school. Some students simply felt a sense of hopelessness in the midst of poverty and their own school failure. Finally, one group felt pushed or thrown out by school personnel who did not want to deal with them anymore. Clearly there was no single self-reported reason for dropping out, even within the same school and urban environment.

Fine (1986) attempted to identify some of the basic school structural characteristics that may lead to dropout. She described her case study as a school that had a disproportionate share of low-achieving students and had insufficient resources, resulting in overcrowded classrooms. Furthermore, teachers and administrators in this Black and Hispanic school were predominantly White, leading to poor communication and a lack of understanding between teachers and students. Regarding the climate of classrooms from which students were most likely to drop out, Fine reported that:

> Classrooms are organized more around control than conversation, more around the authority of the teacher than autonomy of students, and more around competition than collaboration. When students talk to each other or cooperate it often provokes accusations of cheating from their teachers. (p. 403)

Fine used the term "disempowerment" to explain the process of dropping out. Many teachers reported a sense of disempowerment, felt that no one listened to them, felt that school policy did not reflect what was really important for students, and believed that students could not be helped. Teacher feelings of disempowerment carried over to students, who in turn developed feelings of powerlessness and alienation, and it was those students who eventually dropped out.

The disempowerment hypothesis is consistent with the research findings on the psychological state of dropouts both before and after they leave school. Two important variables here are locus of control and self-esteem, variables investigated in the two earlier studies using the national student database. The High School and Beyond studies (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) found that, first, dropouts projected a more external locus of control than did graduates; that is, feelings of having little personal control over what was happening to them. This was found to be especially true among Black dropouts. A second important finding was that the level of self-esteem among dropouts (measured by items such as "I am as able to do things as well as other

people") improved once they left school. Although this may seem surprising at first, leaving a situation that has become a source of many negative experiences would surely be accompanied by feelings of relief and even heightened self-esteem as new possibilities are in sight.

Returning to Fine's study of the inner-city high school, she found that most students who left school were highly energized and motivated at first. Among the 30 recent dropouts whom she interviewed, 28 were busily engaged in something 4 months after leaving school. For the most part, they were engaged in legal and productive activities like enrolling in GED programs, applying to trade schools, or working in low-level jobs, but some illegal activities like drug dealing also were reported. Seven of 15 students who had dropped out of the school 4 years earlier were also interviewed, and things were generally not going well for them. Fine concluded that although there may be some initial psychological advantage to leaving school, this advantage is soon lost as negative consequences begin to accumulate.

In summary, the correlates and presumed causes of school dropout involve a set of related variables that cut across the student's experiences and behaviors, the school environment, and support systems outside of the school including parents, peers, and community agencies. There are multiple points where counselors and others must intervene. The important points of intervention are:

1. Student behaviors within the school:
   - Poor academic performance;
   - Cutting classes; and
   - Uninvolvement in school life outside of the classroom.
2. Student behavior outside of school:
   - Truancy;
   - Increased hours spent working or in illegal activities; and
   - Drug and alcohol use.
3. Student affect:
   - Feelings of hopelessness;
   - Not feeling in control of life events; and
   - Lowered self-esteem.
4. Student life circumstances:
   - Teen pregnancy or parenting; and
   - Social and economic hardships that place adult demands on young people.
5. School climate:
   - Quality of teacher-student interactions;
   - Effective but fair school discipline procedures; and

- Accommodations to students who must combine school with work or family responsibilities.

6. Home and family:
   - Parental interest and involvement in the student's school experiences and progress; and
   - Identification of abusive parents.
7. Community:
   - Negative peer influences that can accelerate student disengagement; and
   - Community support programs (e.g., teen mother services) through counseling agencies, churches, and volunteer groups.

Several larger themes overlay the many variables and points of intervention that have been discussed. The first theme is *opportunity to learn*. At-risk students may require more opportunity to learn (that is, more time allowed for learning tasks), given their poor academic performance. Unfortunately, time is a limited resource for some at-risk youth who have legitimate adult responsibilities outside of school such as teen parenting or working. A second theme is *motivation*. Simply having students spend more time in learning tasks will not suffice if they are not motivated to learn. At-risk youth must believe that they can succeed in school and must perceive some present and future value for their hard work if they are to become motivated. A third theme, related to motivation, is *commitment*. Commitment can be viewed as the opposite of alienation, a condition that characterizes many dropouts and their teachers. In order for students to feel committed to school, they need teachers and counselors who are themselves committed to their students and school, and they need to feel involved in school life outside of the classroom. The last theme is *empowerment*. Empowering students with some legitimate responsibilities (e.g., a say in discipline policies, curriculum choices) should lead to increased identification and affiliation with school. Empowering teachers and counselors with the responsibility and decision-making power they need to help students is likewise important.

Preventing School Dropout

Much research has been done to identify the impediments to students who are at risk of dropping out. The question now becomes what to do about students once they are identified as possessing these characteristics. Counselors and school administrators are continually search-

ing for new approaches that will enable them to implement effective strategies that may prevent students from leaving school. Generally, there are two types of approaches that can be employed: the *clinical approach* and the *systemic approach*.

Clinical Approach

The clinical approach is probably the more common and more familiar to counselors because it deals directly with the student. This approach asks the question, "What's wrong with the student?" It begins to look at predictors and indicators intrinsic to the student who risks dropping out of school. In most cases, this approach will address a number of questions in three areas:

1. The home:
   - Does the student come from a low-income family, a poorly educated family, or a family with serious financial problems?
   - Does the student come from a dysfunctional family where there is dissention, alcohol, or drugs?
   - Were the parents or are the siblings dropouts?
   - Is the student emotionally or physically neglected or abused in the home?
2. Personal traits or circumstances:
   - Does the student have low self-esteem?
   - Does the student lack motivation?
   - Does the student exhibit boredom?
   - Is the student pregnant?
   - Is the student addicted to drugs or alcohol?
3. School behaviors:
   - Is the student frequently absent?
   - Is there a lack of interest in schoolwork?
   - Does the student exhibit hostility, unruliness, passivity, or apathy?
   - Has the student repeated grades?
   - Does the student have difficulty with reading, math, and communication skills, especially in the early grades?

The astute counselor must zero in on these factors and begin to develop a planned, coordinated response of prevention and treatment. Several educational and counseling strategies have been tried over the years to address the problems students who are at risk of dropping out of school face, or to address the needs of students who have already dropped out.

Special education has been one approach for the student whose behavior and poor academic performance indicate that he or she needs

something educationally different than the regular program. Special education may have saved some students from dropping out of school because of individualized instruction and small class size. However, for other special education students who truly did not have a handicapping learning condition but possessed other factors that adversely affected their learning, special education may have led them to feel alienated, unworthy, and even more of a failure. Counselors should be aware that with special education students or other special populations, work may have to be done to build self-concepts.

Remediation has been another method for addressing the academic problems students experience in school. Many students who are at risk of dropping out may have been retained in at least one grade. Another remedial approach is ability grouping that places underachievers in slower classrooms so that they might catch up. The problem with ability grouping is that students in slow classrooms experience embarrassment and lowered self-esteem, and often, as a result, behavioral problems begin to erupt. Research has shown that placing students who have academic or behavioral problems together in the same classroom will not improve student achievement or self-concept (Kulik & Kulik, 1982). On the contrary, ability grouping may worsen the situation because a social hierarchy is inadvertently set up in the school that negatively stigmatizes low-group students (Rosenbaum, 1980; Winn & Wilson, 1983). However, when low-ability students are mixed with average and high-ability students, negative stereotypes are avoided and the slow students may become more challenged and improve. It is important to point out that remedial strategies can be effective if these negative consequences are foreseen and dealt with; for example, by grouping students for only part of the day and by providing a lot of individualized instruction within the classroom so that low students can succeed at achievable academic goals. Students tutoring other students, or cooperative learning, is another effective strategy for students who need remediation.

One of the most successful approaches for addressing the needs of at-risk students is to place them in an alternative program if such programs are available. "Alternative program" is a label for a variety of nontraditional elementary and high school programs that are usually housed in separate buildings away from the traditional school. There is no single model alternative program, nor do these programs always serve the same population. One type of alternative program is the special school for high-risk students who have been repeatedly suspended or otherwise do not seem to fit in at conventional schools. Alternative schools of this type employ individualized academics along with counseling services that are designed to better meet the needs of at-risk

youth. Although alternative schools aim to change the student and therefore come under the clinical approach, these schools also represent the systemic approach (which will be discussed in the next section) because the school and its program are structured around the needs of students. The alternative school is perhaps the best contemporary example of combining the clinical and systemic approaches.

An effective alternative program will better meet the needs of most at-risk youth because of smaller school and class size and more individualized personal attention, including counseling services. Other characteristics of a successful alternative program include autonomy from the regular school, highly committed staff, nontraditional and varied curricula, experiential education involving work in community settings, and a supportive atmosphere resembling a family setting (Wehlage, 1983). Alternative programs can provide a safe, caring environment which, for many at-risk youth, may be the only place where they receive positive attention. For some students, the alternative school may be the only stable "home" or "family" they have.

Alternative programs have been regarded as a highly successful approach (see Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986), but the research findings on the effectiveness of such programs have been mixed partly because of poor research methods. At-risk students tend to prefer alternative programs to regular school and feel better about themselves in a learning environment that provides more personalized student-teacher relationships (Educational Research Services, 1977). Beyond this general effect, however, we do not yet understand how different alternative interventions affect different types of at-risk youth, especially with regard to the myriad counseling interventions that an alternative school might use. Evidence shows behavior modification to be effective with students who act out, but other types of counseling modalities have undergone little systematic research (McDill et al., 1987).

One decision that counselors in both regular and alternative schools may face is whether to treat students in the school setting or outside. There can be some advantages to counseling retreats that temporarily remove students from a school environment that is unpleasant or not conducive to positive change, but isolating students from the school in order to treat them may have unintended negative effects. An interesting study by Catterall (1987) of a 4-day high school counseling retreat found no positive effects of the retreat, and even some slight negative effects when program participants were compared to nonprogram controls. The retreat involved self-concept building activities; skills training in teamwork, decision making, goal setting, and academic learning; and challenge and relaxation exercises. The study found that students who participated in the retreat perceived significantly more negative labeling

by teachers and less social bonding to teachers than did controls 4 weeks after the program. One plausible explanation for these unintended effects is that retreat programs may serve to increase student isolation and alienation from the school. Such programs may reinforce student bonding to other at-risk youth and weaken ties with teachers and school.

It would be remiss to discuss clinical approaches without stressing the importance of collaborative relationships between schools and social service agencies. At-risk students will, in many cases, have other problems besides experiencing failure and frustration in school, as the research reviewed earlier clearly indicates. Behavioral or psychological indicators that students exhibit in school may alert counselors to other problems in the student's life. It is important that the whole student be addressed and not only behavior within the school. In some school districts, student service centers have been implemented in order to personalize counseling and support services that are essential to address fully the needs of at-risk youth. If student services are not available via the school district, counselors and administrators should take steps to bring these services to the schools or provide transportation for students to community agencies. Support and counseling services are also important for parents of at-risk youth who may be contributing to the students' failure in school.

All the above methods can have positive effects on students who are experiencing failure, frustration, and unhappiness in school. However, the clinical approach in and of itself may not solve the problems of the potential school dropout. Although the intention may be to help students, some clinical interventions carry a negative stigma that can result in these programs doing as much harm as good. For example, students who are placed in slow classrooms for several consecutive years are in danger of being labeled "learning disabled" throughout the rest of their school career. Although school systems have begun looking more closely at mainstreaming special education students, the numbers of students who are moved into regular programs are still too few, especially for certain groups such as Black adolescents. Another concern is equity. In many instances, students who are placed in special programs, including alternative education, may receive a watered-down version of the curriculum, leaving them unprepared for postsecondary education or the working world. Expectations may be lowered for students who are enrolled in special programs, and their failure can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In summary, there are several limitations to the clinical approach. First, the goal of some counseling programs is simply to help at-risk students feel good about themselves rather than improving academic performance. It is important to remember that students will generally

feel good about themselves if they are academically successful. A more basic limitation of the clinical approach is that it assumes the problem lies solely within the student. Efforts are geared toward "fixing" the student so that he or she will function better in the traditional school. Too much time and energy can be spent on trying to change unalterable or difficult-to-change factors outside of the school such as ethnic and cultural values, dysfunctional families, and the effects of poverty. The school takes on the role of becoming a social rather than an educational agency. A more fruitful approach for treating the *whole* student is the systemic approach that is discussed next.

Systemic Approach

The systemic approach focuses on changing the educational system to meet the needs of at-risk students. It is more difficult to implement than the clinical approach and therefore one that many school districts shy away from. Very high levels of commitment from the community, the school board, the superintendent, principals, staff, parents, and students are required for the systemic approach to work.

The systemic approach recognizes the unalterable or difficult-to-change factors like race and poverty, but does not allow these factors to become an excuse or roadblock from successfully educating all students. Unalterable factors are taken into consideration in designing a school that is responsive to the whole student and to all students. For many at-risk youth, school is a place where they feel isolated and discouraged. Because of their circumstances and backgrounds (e.g., having to work to support self or family, feeling culturally or racially isolated, possessing a learning style that does not mesh with traditional ways of teaching), school can become a place of frustration for many students. In the case of female students who become pregnant or are already teen mothers, dropping out may be the only solution if accommodations cannot be made for their educational and personal needs (e.g., class scheduling, day care and prenatal care, etc.). For most young people, the only way to handle an extremely frustrating situation is to rebel and act out, or simply to leave the situation, which many students do when they drop out of school.

A progressive school district that supports the systemic approach recognizes the fact that with the diverse demographic makeup of the total student body, it is necessary to design a flexible system around the needs of students. Schools become more student-centered. Factors within the school that can impede student success are addressed. There are four major factors within a school that, if not structured for the benefit of students, can serve as obstructions for at-risk students.

1. Organizational structure. The organizational structure of the school can be one of the major barriers to student success. To begin with, many urban schools are simply too large. Students who attend a large school with large class sizes tend to feel overwhelmed and defeated, especially in transition years such as the sixth and ninth grades. The at-risk student may already be skeptical as he or she enters middle school or high school. These students need to feel accepted on a personal basis and need to feel involved, which is almost impossible to accomplish in a large school.

School hours are another aspect of the organizational structure that can make it difficult for at-risk students who have to work as well as attend school. The way school hours are scheduled, usually from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., leaves little flexibility for working students. Class scheduling can also be unrealistic. Classes are usually set up for 50-minute periods in high school, during which time students are expected to digest all of one subject matter such as math. The bell rings, indicating it is time to move on to the next class and subject. By the time the student returns to math, perhaps after missing class the next day because of an assembly, the concept of the math problem is lost and so is the student. How much better it would have been if the math problem could have been solved without the bell ringing. The point is that in most traditional schools, the organizational structure is not set up to encourage transfer of subject matter from one class to another. Teachers have little time to cross subject lines with other teachers in order to integrate information.

2. Procedural practices. Procedural practices are those practices and policies set up to ensure that the school runs smoothly and to protect the safety of students and staff. Rules and discipline fall under procedural practices. The problem with rules, with the exception of rules that protect the safety of others, is that they sometimes become more important than educating the student. It makes little sense to suspend a student who is skipping school, or to give a failing grade to a student who, for some understandable reason, is having difficulty with a subject. The disciplinary action does little to solve the problem. Such rules do not help the at-risk student, and may convey the message that no one really cares if he or she does succeed. There should be consequences for not following school rules, but rules should not be designed to infringe on educating the student. At-risk students are the ones who suffer most from inflexible, unrealistic discipline policies regarding attendance, tardiness, and dress codes.

3. Instructional strategies. Unfortunately, limited or inflexible instructional strategies and poor pedagogy harm even the most gifted students. Students may have different learning styles. A curriculum that is designed to fit a singular teaching style rather than diverse student

learning styles can be detrimental, especially for the at-risk student. A curriculum that is based on seat time rather than competence can also be a barrier for students who need more time to work at a slower pace. Lastly, a curriculum that is meaningless and disconnected from the student's out-of-school life can result in boredom and disengagement from school. Some of the brightest students have dropped out of school due to boredom and lack of challenge.

4. Educational inequity. Educational inequity is the most difficult of the system factors to assess. Yet, it is probably the factor that harms at-risk students the most. Expectations that are lowered because a student is from a particular ethnic background or because the student is poor serve as an injustice. Some teachers treat poor students differently from middle-class students, believing that poor students are not as capable as those from more affluent families. The same holds true for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students. Students who are made to feel that they are not valued are more likely to drop out. Ironically, these students may not have suffered from low self-esteem until they were cut into a situation where little was expected of them. It is only when a student begins to question his or her self-worth that insecurities and low self-esteem are created. When students' social class and ethnicity are accepted by other students, teachers, and school counseling staff, they will be much more likely to feel good about themselves and succeed. In the case of minority groups, this is more likely to happen if teachers and counselors are from the same ethnic background.

Aside from staff attitudes and expectations that are difficult to detect and change, a more obvious type of educational inequity is placing at-risk students in programs that fail to equip them with a full education. Some alternative programs may do an excellent job of building a comfortable shelter for the damaged student, but may put the student in jeopardy if academic goals and expectations are drastically lower than those for students in the traditional school. At-risk students may later feel they have been cheated by alternative education because they are still unequipped to work and survive in mainstream society.

The school system that is committed to helping at-risk students and educating its entire population will attempt to restructure itself in order to meet the needs of all students. The role that counselors play in this reformation stage is crucial because counselors may know the multiple needs of students better than anyone else in the building. Counselors need to act as visionary guides who instill hope for the future in students, and as student advocates within the school system. The entire system, however, will need everyone's creative leadership and a lot of collaboration to alter those changeable school factors that contribute to student dropout.

In summary, the main advantage of the systemic approach is that the school and its staff become ultimately responsible for the educational and related needs of students. Students are treated on an equal basis, with high but realistic expectations and goals being the norm for *all* students. The school system works cooperatively with social service agencies without, however, *becoming* a social agency. Schools try to adapt to the needs of students rather than the needs and convenience of the bureaucracy. Our society has thrust upon schools the difficult but not impossible challenge of becoming more flexible for a diverse population without lowering educational standards. The challenge is to apply the research on at-risk students toward restructuring the system to better meet their needs. What is not often recognized is that this approach not only works to the advantage of the potential dropout but also is good education for all students.

Conclusions

The placement of this chapter near the end of the book is fitting because, as we have shown, the problem of school dropout involves many of the personal, family, and social issues discussed in previous chapters. We have stressed several main points throughout this chapter that are summarized below.

First, school dropout is a serious problem that eventually harms both the personal lives of young people and our society. Counselors must help students realize that the easy choice to leave school is not necessarily the best choice in the long run. Young people who do not complete their high school education often feel deep regret later in life. As our society and economy change, dropouts will find it increasingly difficult to lead productive and satisfying lives. Second, there is no single type of dropout nor a single magic pill that will help all of those who are at risk of leaving school. In addressing this multifaceted problem, counselors must assess many aspects of student functioning, including what is going on outside of school life, to develop effective interventions that address the whole student. Third, school counselors are an important link to families and community agencies whose help may be needed to deal with the whole student. Likewise, community counselors need to coordinate their services with schools. The fourth and final point is that schools need to be more sensitive to the needs of students through more responsive structuring, scheduling, programs, and policies. Counselors can be effective advocates for at-risk youth in school committees and other forums to ensure that schools recognize and respond to the needs of a diverse student clientele.

The role of the counselor in helping potential dropouts should be, first, to give sound guidance to students who are already experiencing problems and establish primary prevention programs for all students. Second, counselors should play the role of communicator between students and school staff, parents, and community agencies, working to build a climate of caring and respect. For students who are disengaged from school or feel that they are being treated unfairly, caring and respect are needed before any counseling intervention will take effect. Third, the counselor should be an advocate and friend to students who may feel lost or shuffled from teacher to teacher in large schools. Teachers may feel responsible only for part of the student, that is, for student learning in a specific subject area. Counselors are in a better position to deal with the whole student and provide continuity throughout the student's school career, especially in large schools that are often very chaotic places.

Most high school counselors would probably agree that supportive guidance and counseling can help at-risk students have a more positive and productive school experience, especially those students who lack support in their home setting. Counselors are often responsible for helping students make decisions about their educational direction. In most cases, a counselor's daily routine will be more involved with scheduling and dealing with behavior problems rather than working as a team with teachers and other staff to develop holistic solutions. Student problems are too often addressed piecemeal in schools.

Districts that buy into the systemic approach realize that counseling is a valuable component of the total educational system. In addition to providing guidance and day-to-day assistance with discipline, counselors should be full partners in developing and implementing programs designed to increase student academic and personal success. Administrators must define a larger role for counselors. Along with this larger role, counselors must receive adequate training in program development and in organizational and advocacy skills. Districts must support this expanded role by establishing lower student-to-counselor ratios so that counselors have the time to be involved in school-based and district-based decisions. Districts should consider more counseling services in the elementary grades so that early problems can be identified and dealt with more effectively.

In the movement to reshape education, much research has been done to describe and understand the dropout problem, but little has been said in the discussion about the importance of school guidance and counseling. School and community counselors are too often underutilized resources in helping at-risk youth. Counselors can be major contributors to the success of students who experience problems in school. As the

movement to improve schools continues, an expanded role for school and community counselors needs to be considered.

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Chapter 15

THE SOLUTION LIES IN PROGRAMS THAT WORK

Walter Hathaway, Carolyn Sheldon, and Patrick McNamara

The problem of educating at-risk students is not new. In past years, the labels used for at-risk students have differed, but the problems of students who do not complete their high school education, are unable to obtain jobs upon leaving school, and become burdens to their families and society have been part of the American educational scene since comprehensive schooling began.

Who are these students at risk? There is no set pattern. Some are brilliant but bored; others have low ability and are undersupported or deterred by their home situation. Some are emotionally troubled, abused, on drugs, or prematurely pregnant; some are male and some are female; some are wealthy but most are poor. Some come from Bill Cosby's TV family, some from my family or your family. And some have no family at all—at 12 years of age or even earlier, they are on the streets, alone.

The changing demographics of the United States indicate increased growth of the groups with the highest school failure rates. The percentages of poor and minority children in America are rising swiftly—from 17% of the population in 1985 to twice that projected by the year 2025 (Committee on Economic Development, Research and Policy Committee, 1987). This trend, combined with the increasingly complex demands of the workplace, has created a situation demanding immediate action by our schools and communities.

That action is being taken in many places around our nation in the form of successful programmatic responses to the challenges of students at risk.

Almost two thirds of all our nation's poor children are White, but African and Hispanic American children are much more likely to be

poor and educationally disadvantaged than White children (Committee for Economic Development, 1985).

Let's look at some statistics (Duncan & Rodgers, 1985; Hathaway & Kushman, 1988; U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on Children, Youth & Families, 1987):

- Forty-three percent of African American and 40% of Hispanic children are poor.
- African American children are nearly three times as likely to be poor as European American children.
- The national dropout rate for minority students is 50% or higher, versus an average of less than 20% for nonminority students.
- Minority students are often far behind on achievement measures. The Southern Regional Education Board reports, for example, that on national assessment tests, the reading achievement levels of Black 11th-grade students are basically the same as for White seventh graders.
- In 1988 African American students' SAT mathematics and verbal scores were 106 and 92 points lower, respectively, than those of White students. Hispanic American student scores were also substantially lower.
- African American students are approximately three times as likely to be in a class for the educable mentally retarded, but only half as likely to be in a class for the gifted and talented as White students.
- African and Hispanic American students are two to three times as likely to be suspended or expelled and only half as likely to be enrolled in courses that lead to a college education.

In a review of the research, Kushman and Hathaway (1988a) noted that students may be at risk for:

- Performing below potential in school;
- Becoming alienated from school;
- Dropping out of school;
- Failing to get a job, or being employed below their potential; and
- Becoming a drain on society rather than a contributing member.

The symptoms or predictors of dropping out or of being at risk include:

- Poor and deteriorating attendance;
- Behavioral problems;
- Low achievement;
- Premature pregnancy;

- Poor self-esteem;
- Lack of realistic life goals related to schooling; and
- Poor study and learning skills and habits.

Some correlates of dropping out or being at risk include:

- Low family income level;
- Low family educational level;
- Membership in a minority group;
- Emotional difficulties;
- Abuse; and
- Chemical dependency.

The heterogeneous nature of the at-risk population necessitates varied approaches to meet each individual student's unique needs. The reasons why some youth do not succeed in school and life are as numerous as the individuals themselves. The interplay of these reasons adds to the complexity of the problem (see Figure 1). Figure 2 shows some of the factors that can interact to help these at-risk students succeed. The main purpose of this chapter is to profile model programs that have proven successful in reducing or eliminating the causes of failure for students at risk so that counselors and other key service providers can emulate and replicate those successes in their own settings.

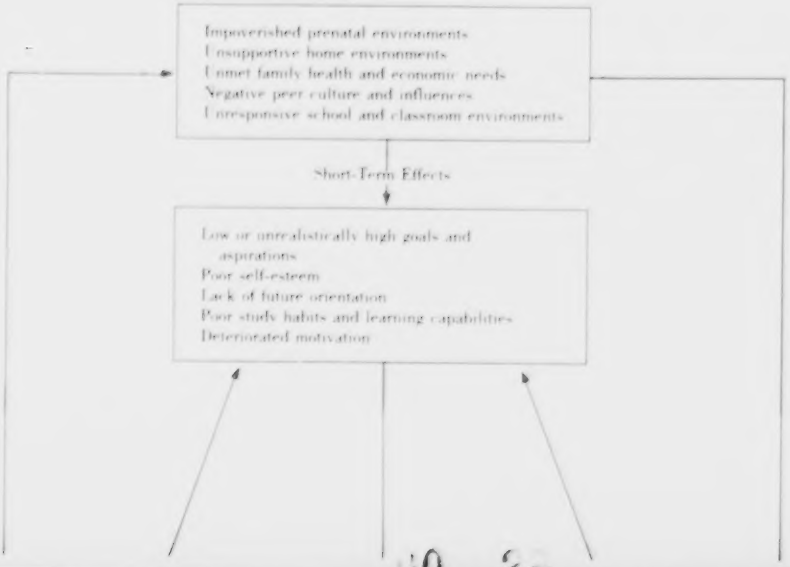
The major characteristics of successful programs for students at risk are well known. In its cover story entitled "Save the Children," (Whitman, 1988), *U.S. News and World Report* summarized them as follows: "The ingredients of successful programs for disadvantaged children are no secret. Typically, they provide a wide range of services, have dedicated staffs that work intensively with clients, involve parents and community groups, and aim, where possible, to help preschoolers" (p. 44).

Even though the broad outlines of the characteristics of successful programs for students at risk are well known, there are no easy answers to the specific problems of educating students at risk. Because many of the most promising programs have been initiated only in the past few years, there is little evidence available on the effectiveness of these efforts.

The previous chapters in this book have outlined some of the numerous causes of the problems of at-risk students and have described approaches to prevention, intervention, and remediation of these problems. This closing chapter will describe the general standards of program evaluation, give the specific criteria we used in identifying successful programs for at-risk students, and provide some illustrative examples of programs that work according to those criteria.

FIGURE 1

Model of Factors of Failure for Students At Risk


Impoverished prenatal environments
Unsupportive home environments
Unmet family health and economic needs
Negative peer culture and influences
Unresponsive school and classroom environments
Short-Term Effects
Low or unrealistically high goals and aspirations
Poor self-esteem
Lack of future orientation
Poor study habits and learning capabilities
Deteriorated motivation

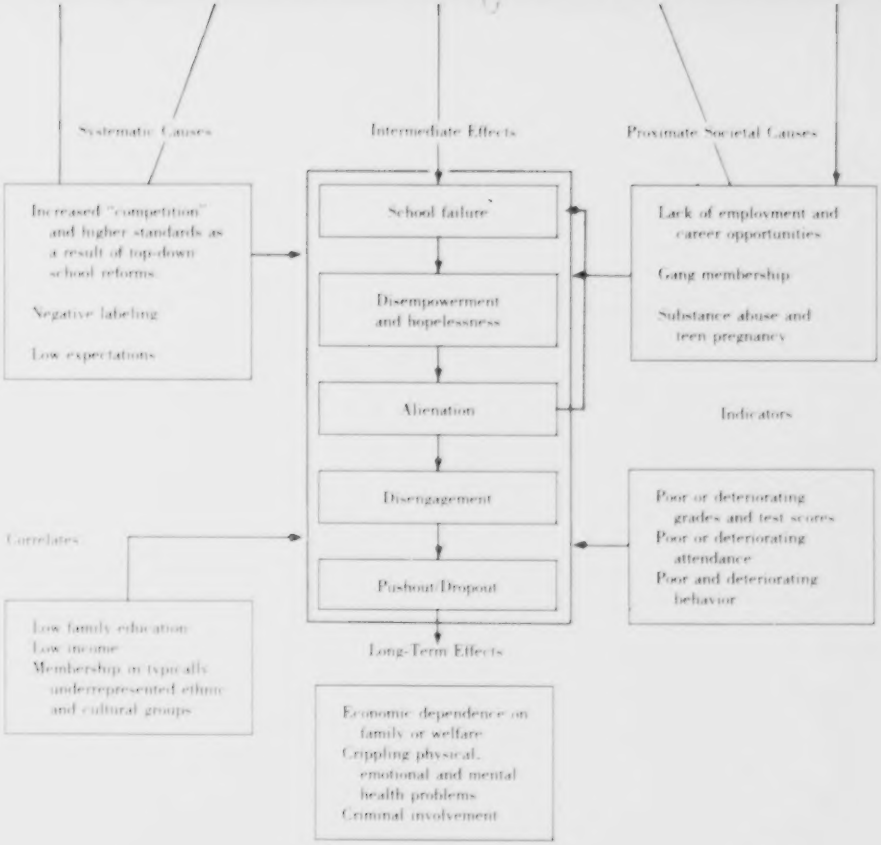
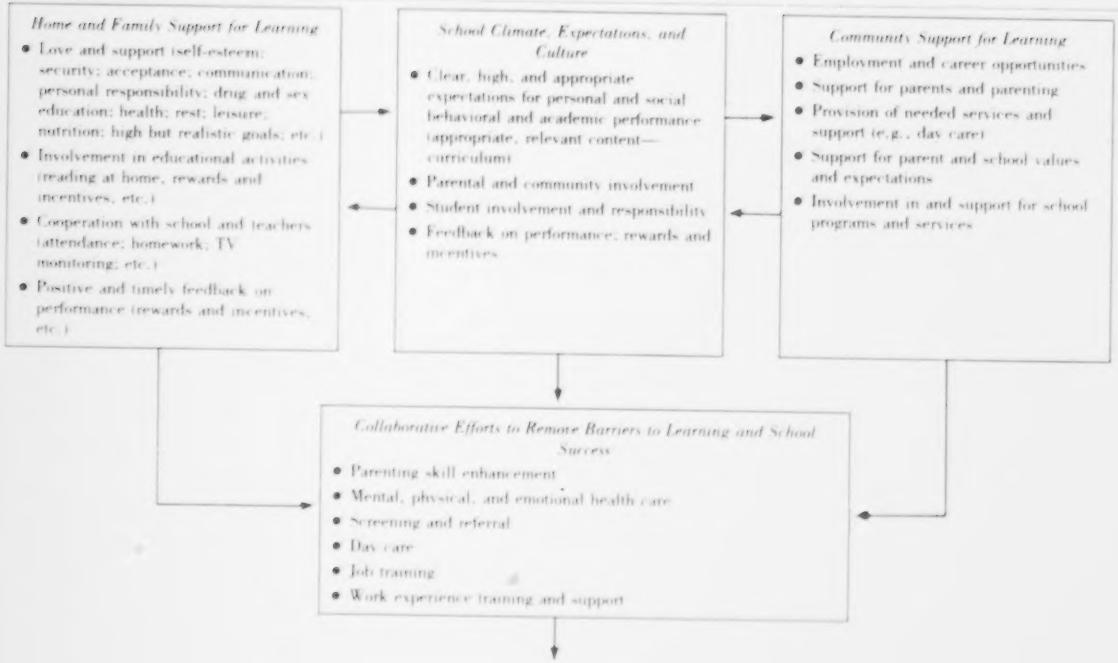
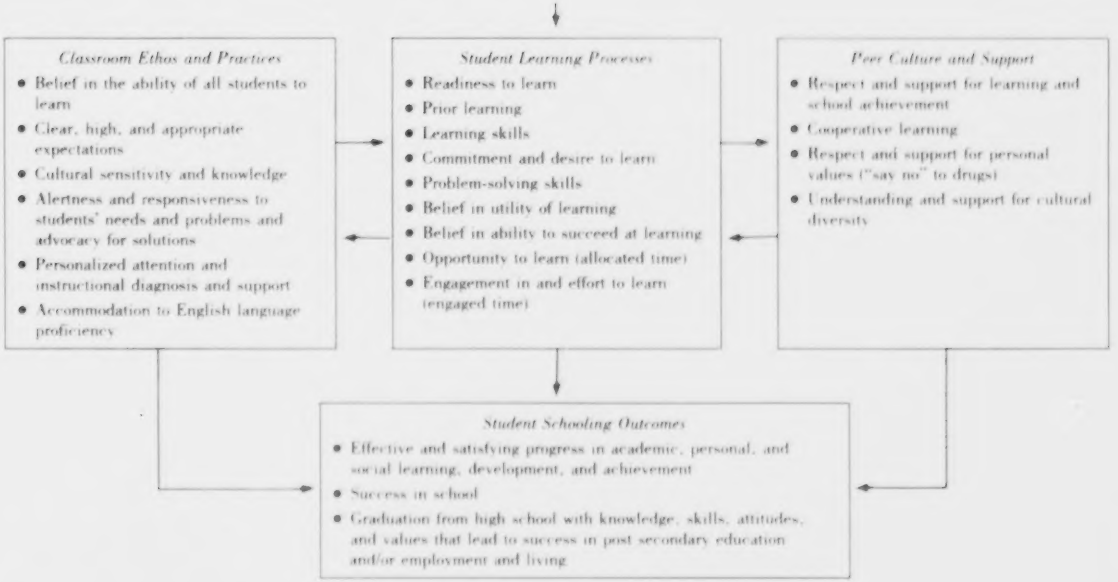

Systematic Causes
Intermediate Effects
Proximate Societal Causes
Increased "competition" and higher standards as a result of top-down school reforms
Negative labeling
Low expectations
School failure
Disempowerment and hopelessness
Alienation
Disengagement
Pushout/Dropout
Lack of employment and career opportunities
Gang membership
Substance abuse and teen pregnancy
Indicators
Poor or deteriorating grades and test scores
Poor or deteriorating attendance
Poor and deteriorating behavior
Correlates
Low family education
Low income
Membership in typically underrepresented ethnic and cultural groups
Long-Term Effects
Economic dependence on family or welfare
Crippling physical, emotional and mental health problems
Criminal involvement

FIGURE 2

Model of Factors of Success for Students At Risk


Home and Family Support for Learning
• Love and support (self-esteem; security; acceptance; communication; personal responsibility; drug and sex education; health; rest; leisure; nutrition; high but realistic goals; etc.)
• Involvement in educational activities (reading at home, rewards and incentives, etc.)
• Cooperation with school and teachers (attendance; homework; TV monitoring; etc.)
• Positive and timely feedback on performance (rewards and incentives, etc.)
School Climate, Expectations, and Culture
• Clear, high, and appropriate expectations for personal and social behavioral and academic performance (appropriate, relevant content—curriculum)
• Parental and community involvement
• Student involvement and responsibility
• Feedback on performance; rewards and incentives
Community Support for Learning
• Employment and career opportunities
• Support for parents and parenting
• Provision of needed services and support (e.g., day care)
• Support for parent and school values and expectations
• Involvement in and support for school programs and services
Collaborative Efforts to Remove Barriers to Learning and School Success
• Parenting skill enhancement
• Mental, physical, and emotional health care
• Screening and referral
• Day care
• Job training
• Work experience training and support


Classroom Ethos and Practices
• Belief in the ability of all students to learn
• Clear, high, and appropriate expectations
• Cultural sensitivity and knowledge
• Alertness and responsiveness to students' needs and problems and advocacy for solutions
• Personalized attention and instructional diagnosis and support
• Accommodation to English language proficiency
Student Learning Processes
• Readiness to learn
• Prior learning
• Learning skills
• Commitment and desire to learn
• Problem-solving skills
• Belief in utility of learning
• Belief in ability to succeed at learning
• Opportunity to learn (allocated time)
• Engagement in and effort to learn (engaged time)
Peer Culture and Support
• Respect and support for learning and school achievement
• Cooperative learning
• Respect and support for personal values ("say no" to drugs)
• Understanding and support for cultural diversity
Student Schooling Outcomes
• Effective and satisfying progress in academic, personal, and social learning, development, and achievement
• Success in school
• Graduation from high school with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that lead to success in post secondary education and/or employment and living

General Standards of Effective Program Evaluation

Although it is difficult to assess objectively and conclusively the exact value of a program, general standards for program evaluation can be applied to assess the worth of programs for students at risk (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1981). These standards include criteria used to determine the utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy of program evaluation.

Utility standards of program evaluation include: audience identification; evaluator credibility; appropriate scope and selection of program effectiveness information; clear description of the perspectives, procedures, and rationale used to interpret that information; clarity and comprehensiveness of reporting; appropriate and timely sharing of results; and planned follow-through. Feasibility standards include: practicality and minimal disruptiveness of the evaluation procedures; political viability; and cost-effectiveness. Propriety standards include formal commitment to participation in the evaluation and responsiveness to its findings; identification and removal of any conflicts of interest; assurance of the public's right to know; protection of the rights and dignity of the participants; balanced, accurate, and fair reporting; and fiscal responsibility in using the resources dedicated to evaluation. Accuracy standards include: clear description of the treatment whose effects are being evaluated and of the relevant contextual factors; adequate delineation of the purposes and procedures of the evaluation, including the evidence used and its sources; appropriate information gathering; systematic quality control of the data and their analyses; justification of the conclusions in terms of the evidence; and freedom from bias.

These general standards of good program evaluation should be applied when assessing the worth of programs for students at risk.

Criteria for Evaluating Successful Programs for Students at Risk

We have identified and highlighted some successful efforts in the remainder of this chapter. The success of these programs has been determined by the application of a set of criteria including, but not limited to: (a) evidence of effectiveness in attaining the program's mission and goals gained through appropriate evaluation and monitoring; (b) comprehensiveness of the services offered; (c) relevance to post-school student goals; (d) cultural sensitivity; (e) community involvement in planning and implementation; (f) clarity of the program's objectives

and their integration with the goals of the district educational program; and (g) the collaborative nature of the program, with planned interactions among parents, students, teachers, administrators and support staff, and community and business representatives. The remainder of this chapter presents the results of the application of these criteria both through a survey of the nation's largest school systems and through a review of the evaluation literature on national and local programs.

Results of a National Survey on Successful Programs for At-Risk Students

In January 1988, the Portland (OR) Public School District's Department of Research and Evaluation conducted a survey of 114 directors of research and evaluation from the largest school districts in the United States and Canada (Hathaway & McNamara, 1988). A total of 83 responses were received to this questionnaire, which asked about districts' definitions of students at risk and requested information about formal policies, plans, and programs for identifying and serving students at risk and about procedures for monitoring the effects of efforts to meet these students' special needs. The districts were asked to provide specifics on these issues, and many documents accompanied the completed questionnaires. The following two sections summarize the survey responses and provide a brief analysis of the material that accompanied the responses.

Definitions

Just as with the term "dropout," there seemed to be no agreed-upon definition for the phrase "students at risk." The definitions ranged from the most typical response of giving lists of student at-risk "characteristics" or "contributing factors," to the occasional broad projections of what students may be at risk for.

In the definitions provided by the responding districts, the most common characteristics of students at risk were: (a) poor attendance, (b) retention in grade or school failure, (c) low standardized test scores, (d) older than classmates, and (e) family background. Other factors frequently mentioned were: (a) student is a parent or is pregnant, (b) discipline problems, (c) lack of interest in school, (d) minority status, (e) behavioral problems, and (f) limited English proficiency.

One district returned this sample definition that identifies common characteristics of students at risk: "Students were defined as at-risk based on four types of information: (a) if they had achievement scores

below the 41st National Curve Equivalent (national 35rd percentile); (b) if they were one or more years below average performance on standardized test scores; (c) if they were in danger of failing on a structured teacher report; (d) or had risk factors external to school (e.g., return from court placement, pregnancy, abuse, etc.)."

A review of the program descriptions submitted with the surveys did lead to the identification of some innovative and promising programs based on the following criteria: the number and types of students reached were specified; comprehensive coordination of programs was indicated; community involvement in the planning process was evident; periodic monitoring and evaluation were planned; multilevel (home, district, cluster, school, community) solutions were envisioned; a long-range vision of success was articulated; and evidence of demonstrated effectiveness was provided.

Highlights From Some Exemplary Programs

The Detroit and Cincinnati public school districts both reported collaboratives that involve educators, business leaders, parents, students, government and community organizations, clergy, law officials, and media in planning and overseeing dropout prevention efforts. These collaboratives have hired staff to coordinate all program components that address problems of students at risk. The Detroit Prevention Collaborative has a 5-year strategic plan and the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative has an initial 3-year plan; both plans address the problems of at-risk students in preschool through 12th grade. Because both are in their early stages of implementation, as yet there are no documented demonstrated effects.

The Tucson Unified School District also has a model collaborative. Tucson focuses on lowering dropout rates in middle and high schools. The collaborative consists mainly of educators, with some involvement of students, parents, and business leaders. The district personnel coordinate the programs.

The Eugene (OR) School District and the Scarborough School District in Ontario, Canada, have early identification programs that assess the special needs of newly enrolled students in their districts. The Eugene district has a mandatory questionnaire filled out by each student or parent upon a student's entry into the school system. If any three of the six questions on the questionnaire are answered affirmatively, the student is labeled at risk, and special provisions are made for that student's education. The Scarborough district has an "Early and Ongoing Identification Project" that identifies "a child's learning strengths and

weaknesses in order to maximize success and minimize failure." This project is required by the Ministry of Education for all Ontario schools. All parents of students entering the Scarborough district are shown a filmstrip and audiotape that explain the early identification project and make parents more aware of their children's educational needs.

Other districts having especially innovative strategic plans for serving at-risk students are those of Milwaukee, Seattle, Norfolk, and Portland. Milwaukee implemented a "Plan of Service for Children At-Risk" in the 1987–88 school year, which uses the district's database to identify students in grades 8–12 with specific at-risk characteristics. The district contracts with agencies in Milwaukee addressing the problems of at-risk students, and has a management team composed of representatives from the contracted agencies and district personnel to monitor the success of programs. Seattle founded a 39-member "Disproportionality Task Force" in August 1985 with the goal of eliminating disproportionality in all aspects of education by 1989–90. The task force, made up of educators and representatives from legal, ethnic, and community organizations, made recommendations to the school board on how best to eliminate disproportionality. Norfolk Public Schools initiated a school improvement plan called SPIRAL, which has been effective in reducing dropout rates by 43%, increasing retention rates in grades 1–6 by 12%, decreasing expulsions, and raising standardized test scores in its first 4 years of operation.

The Portland (OR) School District also has a variety of successful programs for students at risk, including a comprehensive process for identifying the needs of students at risk and for gaining cooperation among parents, students, teachers, administrators, business and community representatives, and policymakers in planning and carrying out improved programs and services for students at risk. Several of Portland's specific programs are profiled in the following section.

Profiles of Successful Programs for Students at Risk

In addition to conducting the national survey described above, we have reviewed the literature on effective programs for students at risk (Kushman & Hathaway, 1988a , 1988b) using the criteria described earlier and have selected the following programs as having demonstrated exceptional effectiveness. We have noted the target population, the special features, the counseling/mental health component, and the demonstrated effectiveness of each program as well as a key contact person.

1. *Program: Middle College High School, Long Island City, NY*

Target Population: 10th, 11th, and 12th-grade students who have had at least 20% absenteeism in the ninth grade, are about 1 year behind grade level in academic achievement, or come from disadvantaged homes.

Special Features: The students are admitted directly from junior high school. The admissions committee consists of the principal, school counselors, and selected graduating seniors. There are over 600 applicants for each entering 10th grade class of approximately 200 students.

The school is located on the LaGuardia Community College campus. The high school students are encouraged to use the college facilities and take college courses for credit.

Students work in internships for one third of the school year. Flexible schedules and self-paced classes allow for accommodation of student needs and development of responsibility. The total size of the school (500 teachers), as well as class sizes of 20 students or less, allows teachers and administrators to supervise students closely.

Counseling/Mental Health Component: There are daily group counseling sessions of 10–12 students led by 4 full-time counselors. The issues for discussion range from personal/psychological to drug, alcohol, and family problems.

Demonstrated Effectiveness: The cost per student is the same as that in a regular New York City school of similar size, about $5,400. Middle College High School has an 85% graduation rate. Three fourths of its students go on to college.

Besides these statistics, the location of the high school on a college campus adds to its effectiveness for the at-risk students it serves. The setting gives students a realistic picture of college and adult life as well as the accompanying responsibilities and expectations.

Contact: Celia Cullen, Principal, Middle College High School, Long Island, NY 11101.

2. *Program: Guaranteed Services Counseling and Guidance Program, Santa Clara Unified School District, Santa Clara, CA.*

Target Population: K–12th grade. This program serves all students in the district, K–12. Some students are specifically referred if they are identified as being at risk of dropping out, or have already done so.

Special Features: Because the program serves all district students, very few, if any, are allowed to slip through the cracks.

There is an elementary, middle, and high school component to the program, with specific services for each grade level consistent with the particular needs of that age group.

Students are not treated in isolation from their total environment. The areas of service span a variety of needs: orientation and registration; educational and career planning; testing; communication with parents and students; and individual and group counseling.

The Guidance Services Calendar, which is designed and implemented by each individual school, is an essential component of the Guaranteed Services Counseling and Guidance program. This calendar ensures that services are available at the appropriate time to meet the needs of the student population of each school.

Counseling/Mental Health Component: A counselor works directly with each student, planning a program that will best meet his or her needs, and serves as a resource person for parents, teachers, administrators, and school staff who work with students.

Demonstrated Effectiveness: The Guaranteed Services Counseling and Guidance Program has had remarkable success since it was implemented in the Santa Clara schools. In a November 1988 evaluation report on this program as adopted and implemented in Portland, 82% of those students responding to a survey reported that they were satisfied with the counseling help they received. In the same year, 91% of teachers responding to survey questions reported satisfaction with the counseling services (Leitner, 1988).

One aspect of the program, which allows for annual reassessment and restructuring if necessary, is the yearly evaluation by the district administrators. This ensures that students and parents are given the best resources possible to meet their unique needs.

The Santa Clara program has served as a model for other guaranteed service programs throughout California and the United States. Its success is due, in part, to its not being a static, externally implemented program, but a dynamic effort that first assesses and then designs to meet the unique needs of a district and its individual schools.

Contact: Gene Unger, Director of Secondary Education, Santa Clara Unified School District, 1889 Lawrence Road, Santa Clara, CA 95051.

3. Program: The Portland Investment, Portland, OR

Target Population: At-risk youth ages 12–21, defined primarily as those whose success is impeded by any of the "barriers to success" developed by the Leaders Roundtable, a group of key leaders from government, education, business, industry, religion, and the community (Leaders Roundtable, 1987).

Special Features: This is a comprehensive plan to provide education and employment related services to at-risk youth. Specifically, the purpose of the Portland Investment is to reduce youth unemployment, reduce dropout rates, enhance academic achievement, and improve the academic, social, and economic prospects of Portland's youth.

There are 13 programs under the auspices of the Portland Investment. This multifaceted approach to meeting the multiple needs of at-risk youth recognizes the diverse problems that lead to being at risk. The subprograms and their intended purposes are:

A. *Bridge*—To help at-risk 14- and 15-year-old students make a successful transition from middle to high school;

B. *Career Awareness Related Education (CARE)*—To keep high school juniors and seniors in school until they graduate or obtain a GED;

C. *Career Pathways*—To assist low-achieving high school juniors and seniors from low-income families with their academic performance in order to improve their opportunities for college admission or a job upon graduation;

D. *Financial Services Academy*—To provide employability skills and experience in the financial services field;

E. *Partnership*—To help minority and disadvantaged high school sophomores develop basic and vocational skills that will help them obtain a job upon graduation;

F. *Registry*—To recognize, reward, and motivate through mentorships, scholarships, and job opportunities high school sophomores who show potential for success;

G. *Summer Teen Employment Program (STEP)*—To assist 14- and 15-year-old at-risk youth to reduce achievement losses in reading and math during summers, to decrease teen pregnancy, and to lower dropout rates;

H. *North Portland Student Services Center*—To help students' attendance and academic performance through increased involvement of social service agencies in the school life of children;

I. *Comprehensive Summer Youth Employment Program*—To assist youth to obtain a diploma or GED and provide them with the skills to establish long-term employability;

J. *Teen Parents Program*—To encourage and assist teen parents and pregnant teens to obtain a diploma or GED;

K. *Frontier One*—To help 12–17-year-old youth who have experienced legal, behavioral, and academic difficulties find the best place for themselves, in or out of school;

L. *Outside In*—To provide preemployment skills, attitude enhancement, and basic necessities to at-risk street youth; and

M. *Youth Employment Institute (YEI)*—To provide 16–21-year-old youth with job skills and employment.

Counseling/Mental Health Component: Seven of these programs offer direct counseling services, and the others refer youth to services as needed.

The Targeted Services Specialist for the Portland Investment Plan works individually with each student to determine specific needs and provide a link to the programs that will best meet those needs.

Demonstrated Effectiveness: Although some component programs of the Portland Investment have been operating for some time, the coordinated effort has existed only since 1987. There has not yet been a comprehensive evaluation of the whole effort. A descriptive evaluation of the Portland Investment was done, however, in July 1988. This evaluation was highly favorable and has resulted in the Portland Investment becoming a national model for broad collaborative school/community efforts to improve and coordinate support for students at risk.

Contact: Linda Kelley, Private Industry Council, 1704 N.E. 26th Ave., Portland, OR 97212.

4. *Program: Early and Ongoing Identification Project, Ontario, Canada*

Target Population: All students in the public schools in Ontario, Canada. The parents of all students entering the Ontario schools are

interviewed to determine their child's academic and personal needs. The students' educational programs are then designed to reflect the identified needs of each individual student.

Special Features: By early and ongoing identification of a particular student's needs, the school is able to develop a personalized program of instruction that avoids problems that might develop later in that child's educational career.

Although not specific to at-risk students, the Early and Ongoing Identification Project will catch the students who have at-risk characteristics, and by doing so may avoid the problems associated with school failure and dropping out.

Counseling/Mental Health Component: If a particular problem is identified that requires more than ordinary classroom resources, support staff are provided to work individually with students. The Ontario schools will, with parental permission, refer students to nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, or other support staff.

Demonstrated Effectiveness: Because all students in Ontario are required by law to participate in the Early and Ongoing Identification Project, there is no control group against which those in the project can be compared. The Ministry of Education for the Ontario Province gave the project positive reviews, citing improved communication between school and parents as one positive result.

Contact: Assistant Deputy Minister of Education Programs, Ontario Ministry of Education, Mowat Block, Queen's Park, Toronto, Ontario M7A 1L2 CANADA.

5. *Program: Positive Alternatives to School Suspension (PASS), Portland, OR*

Target Population: High school students with behavioral and discipline problems.

Special Features: The PASS program provides school staff with an alternative to out-of-school suspension for secondary students with discipline problems. Whereas out-of-school suspensions interrupt the learning sequence of students who may already be having difficulties, and possibly increase the risk of students dropping out of school, the PASS program provides positive, structured resolutions to the problems that frequently lead to suspension and expulsion.

Three main strategies are employed in the PASS program: (a) Conferencing—provides students who have experienced discipline problems with a better understanding of themselves through counseling, and an increased ability to anticipate and avoid future problems; (b) Time-out—gives students a time to "cool off" for one or two class periods before returning to their regular classes; (c) In-house suspension—provides a structured, on-site environment for students during their suspensions, so as not to interrupt the students' learning sequence.

The components of the PASS program ensure a balanced and holistic approach to student discipline. The four components are: (a) *Student:* peer counseling, clarification of school expectations, classes that prepare students to deal realistically with their world, tutoring, and personal advising and counseling; (b) *Staff:* staff awareness of PASS program, monitoring of classwork during time-out or in-house suspension, multicultural sensitivity training and resources, classroom visitation, and additional referrals; (c) *Parent:* parent conferences on their child's behavior problems, regular contact with parents on child's status, and additional referrals; (d) *Community:* guest speakers and community resources available for specific problems.

Counseling/Mental Health Component: In all schools with PASS programs, group as well as individual counseling is available. Such counseling is done by the PASS coordinator. As a preventive strategy, counseling is the first recommendation in all schools. Counseling focuses on attitudinal changes related to discipline and behavior. In one PASS school, resources are focused on drug and alcohol counseling. Regular school counselors are available for consultation as often as needed. These counselors play an important role in coordinating and implementing the PASS program.

Demonstrated Effectiveness: The staff of PASS schools report that they appreciate the program. It offers them alternatives to traditional disciplining strategies. Two of the three schools where the program operates, however, reported an increase in out-of-school suspensions since the PASS program began (Grice, 1986).

In interviews with school staff where PASS programs are operating, the consensus is that the program has had a positive effect on school climate. Less violent behavior had been reported, and teachers feel better able to resolve conflict without the help of support staff. The disproportionality of minorities being disciplined also has decreased in PASS schools.

Contact: Coordinator, Discipline Programs, Student Services Department, Portland Public Schools, Child Services Center, 531 S.E. 14th, Portland, OR 97214.

6. *Program: Project SOAR (Student Opportunity, Advancement, and Retention), New York City, NY*

Target Population: 9th- and 10th-grade students absent at least 20 days in the semester previous to admission or retained a grade because of low academic achievement. Specifically targeted are limited English proficiency and special education students.

Special Features: Project SOAR is an alternative school environment within a regular high school setting. Classes and individual tutorials in English, math, science, and social studies are offered. The goals of the project are to improve attendance and achievement and increase retention.

Besides special classes, students in Project SOAR receive dental, vision, hearing, and health services, group and individual counseling, and cultural and recreational field trips. Close contact is maintained with students' homes; this includes home visits, regular teacher-parent conferences and phone calls, plus school functions and workshops for both parents and students.

Counseling/Mental Health Component: Intensive group and individual counseling is an integral part of Project SOAR and is required for all participants.

Demonstrated Effectiveness: For those students participating in Project SOAR for a full school year, the program has proved effective. Attendance was improved and about half passed at least one more class than they had the previous year.

Contact: Bernard Wolinez, Chief Administrator, Office of High School Support Services, New York City Schools, 362 Schermerhorn Street, Brooklyn, NY 11217.

7. *Program: Summer Training and Education Program (STEP)*
(Initiated and managed by Public/Private Ventures (1987) in five school districts: Boston, Fresno, San Diego, Seattle, and Portland)

Target Population: Disadvantaged youth 14 and 15 years old who have experienced low academic achievement, are at high risk of teen

pregnancy and parenthood, and are eligible for the Federal Summer Youth Employment and Training Program.

Special Features: STEP encourages at-risk youth to complete their schooling and graduate by addressing two main causes of dropping out: low academic achievement and teenage pregnancy. The program operates during the summers and provides students with (a) minimum wage, part-time summer jobs; (b) remedial math and reading education; (c) life-skills training; and (d) reasonable social and sexual behavior training.

During the school year, the program reinforces the goals and gains made during the summer through ongoing contact with students by the STEP advocates. This is augmented through personal counseling, group social and educational activities, and parental contact.

Counseling/Mental Health Component: Personal and group counseling is available in most STEP programs. It is particularly emphasized during the intervening school year as a means of follow-up and ongoing adult support.

Demonstrated Effectiveness: The results are encouraging. During the summer, when non-STEP youth lost about a full grade level in reading and a half grade level in math achievement, STEP youth lost an average of only one third a grade level in reading, and actually gained a third of a grade level in math. STEP students were also less likely to fail or be absent, reported gains in self-esteem, participation in school activities, better attitudes and performance in school and jobs, and were one and a half times more likely to use contraception than were sexually active non-STEP youth (Public/Private Ventures, 1987).

Contact: Public/Private Ventures, 399 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106.

8. *Program: Project Return, Portland, OR*

Target Population: Students who have dropped out of or are chronically absent from school. Three methods are used for referral: (a) administrative referral based on eight unexcused half-days within a 20-day period, (b) parental referral, and (c) self-referral.

Special Features: The Project Return staff assesses each referral and plans the appropriate response. Contact is then made with the student by phone to further assess the student's individual needs and causes

of truancy. An interview at the student's home or at the project office follows the phone contact, and provides further information on the student's potential to return to some educational program.

If students cannot immediately enter the school or alternative program that has been jointly determined to be appropriate, they are placed in the "transition classroom." This provides the students with an opportunity to complete coursework they had not previously completed because of irregular attendance, and to set a pattern of regular attendance. It also allows the school to test and evaluate the student's achievement level.

After a period of up to 60 days in the transition classroom, an exit plan is designed for each student, in which goals for attendance and academic achievement are set. Once the student begins the school program, the Project Return staff monitors that pupil's attendance and provides instructional support.

Counseling/Mental Health Component: Personal and group counseling is available to students through the services of a counselor assigned to the project. The counselor also facilitates the transition of students into high school programs by planning with the receiving high school staff and monitoring student progress.

Demonstrated Effectiveness: Middle school truancy was reduced by 10.6% during the second year of the program; and it was found that the earlier in the year that students were identified, the better the chance for sustained reenrollment. The use of the "transition classroom" concept seems to have minimized the loss of students caused by placement delays as well as reduced costs by avoiding second and third efforts at processing a student (Grice, 1987).

Contact: Alcena Boozer, Administrator of Alternative Education, 6318 S.W. Corbett, Portland, OR 97201

Conclusions and Implications for Action

Our report on the at-risk programs of 83 large city and county school systems in the United States and Canada revealed that many districts are working to reduce the dropout rates by identifying at-risk individuals and providing special programs and assistance for them. Most programs are so new that it is difficult to determine just which strategies are the most successful at keeping students in school and

helping them succeed in school and in life. (Hathaway & McNamara, 1988).

Some of the more promising programs involve many members of the community, including business leaders, parents, educators, and even the media. The development of these collaboratives requires that diverse elements of the community work together to help provide a better future for at-risk students and society as a whole. Such mobilization of the whole community is one extremely important step that should be addressed by anyone developing an at-risk program. The statistics found throughout this book and its references, especially those on the future costs of continued failure to address the needs of students at risk, should motivate such collaborative efforts. Many businesses have already found that it is more beneficial for them to invest money in school programs than to donate money to colleges (Bailey, 1988). By investing in school programs, business and industry help to ensure the existence of employable graduates with requisite skills. Using the media is also an excellent idea: television, radio, and newspapers reach many people who might be interested in improving their community and thus better the quality of their lives. It is an important part of the role of at-risk program directors to involve the community.

Another important role of program directors and their staff is to secure funding for these programs. Even the best programs cannot succeed, or even proceed, without dedicated individuals and adequate funding.

Our survey also revealed that programs for students at risk that work tend to have certain common characteristics, although not every successful program exemplifies all characteristics in the same way. Some of the common characteristics of successful at-risk student service programs are:

- Using multiple approaches to reach heterogenous populations;
- Being flexible;
- Working with other agencies in a coordinated fashion;
- Being sensitive to concerns of the population(s) being served, (being culturally sensitive and addressing the specific problems of at-risk populations);
- Including employment training;
- Including life skills training;
- Identifying students at risk early;
- Involving the entire community (including youth service agencies, businesses, government and other student, parent, and community representatives); and
- Treating each student as an individual and as a complex, whole person.

Well planned, supported, and executed evaluation is another essential ingredient for a successful program. There should be both formative and summative evaluation of programs. Formative evaluation is extremely important for keeping any program on track and responding to the needs of those being treated. If something is not working, it is better to find out early and change it than to continue because "that's what we originally planned to do." Another reason for regular evaluation is to contribute to decisions about future funding. The funders of programs, whether governmental or private, need to see that their support is getting results.

Summative evaluation is also important to give specific information about the overall success of programs in attaining their goals. Any evaluation process should follow the Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1981). The areas to be evaluated should be closely related to the original (or adjusted) goals of the program. Evaluation criteria and procedures should be determined at the same time that the goals and objectives of the program are established—this will help to prevent biased evaluation procedures.

A final important aspect of evaluating programs for students at risk that can help to ensure success is embracing the points of view of all the major stake holders: students receiving services, those providing the services, and the community, parents, business, and so forth.

Our nation is founded on the belief that every individual is of great worth. The sacrifice of any individual's potential is therefore a loss of tragic proportions. Thus, it is a moral as well as an economic disaster when even a single student at risk succumbs to the risks and drops out of school only to drop in on society later as a crushing burden.

Saving students at risk makes enormous practical as well as moral sense. We can make a modest investment to help now, or we can pay a terrible price later. The Committee for Economic Development, as quoted in Smith and Lincoln (1988), found that for every $1.00 we now invest to identify and help students at risk early in their school careers, we can save $4.74 in costs of remedial education, welfare, and crime further down the road.

Failure to meet the needs of students at risk is thus not only a tragic human waste, but also a mortgaging of the future of our society and our children. By rising to meet this challenge, we can create a more humane society in which all individuals are empowered to reach their full potential and thus become contributing members of the community. It is our hope that research, ideas, processes, and solutions set forth in this chapter and this book will help us all work together to create more successful responses to the problems of at-risk youth.

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